

AM PROGRAM, ABC RADIO, INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL BRISSENDEN

Professor Ian Chubb speaks with Michael Brissenden about research priorities.

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MICHAEL BRISSENDEN INTRODUCTION: The Chief Scientist, Professor Ian Chubb, is warning that Australia needs to change its research approach or risk medium to long term damage to the nation.

In a speech to a meeting of university heads, he'll outline a list of research priorities that he says presents a pragmatic balance between pure learning and problem solving.

Professor Chubb says the rest of the world is already well ahead of us and unless Australia's research priorities change we'll fall further behind and see a talent drain.

The Chief Scientist, Ian Chubb, joins me in our Canberra studio.

Professor Chubb, welcome to the program.

IAN CHUBB: Thank you.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: What are the priority areas of research?

IAN CHUBB: Well, I think that there are things where we can easily clearly see the national interest and why the nation needs to do things.

So take food, cyber security, population health, manufacturing, advanced manufacturing, energy, resources - these are areas where we have particularly capability but also a very special need.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: And areas presumably that you think we haven't prioritised in the past?

IAN CHUBB: Well, we haven't formally prioritised them so when you, if you were to ask me, you know, how much do we invest in those areas right now, I'd say I can't really tell you. I could tell you the headline figure but when you look under the headline and try to read the story then that's much more opaque.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: How far have we fallen behind the rest of the world when it comes to research?

IAN CHUBB: Oh, well, I think the, if you look at how long the rest of the world or some of the countries we'd compare and contrast ourselves with, so say the Western European democracies, the United States, Canada and so on, they've been in one form or another using priorities for a long time, years - decades in some instances. The United States, 30 or 40 years they've been putting some sense of priority for a proportion of their research budget spends.

So I need to emphasis we're not talking about all of it. All of it presently is about \$9.2 billion from the Commonwealth alone. We're not talking about all of it, we're trying to say that we should make sure that these things of particular importance are funded appropriately, adequately to do the research we need.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Now you do talk about the fact that because we haven't really had this prioritised approach, there is a risk that if we keep going we'll fall further behind and people will, there will be an inevitable brain drain. Does the Government recognise that this is a problem at this stage?

IAN CHUBB: Well, I think so. I think we took the idea of establishing some research priorities, identifying some research priorities to the first meeting of the Commonwealth Science Council, the Prime Minister and

three of his ministers were in attendance and they asked me to come back to the next meeting with some elaborated research priorities.

So, at that level of principle, yes, have I had any negative feedback from the Prime Minister or his ministers, no.

The Prime Minister did make a point...

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: But you haven't had any direct pledges of support and funding yet?

IAN CHUBB: No, but I think it's too early for that but the Prime Minister did make a particular point of saying that we had to support fundamental, basic research as well. This wasn't just an applied research agenda - which of course, it could be easily portrayed and is sometimes portrayed as such - but it's a whole research agenda.

So there are things, there are problems we know we need to solve but we don't know enough, we don't have the knowledge to solve them so we need to do that fundamental research and then use some of that knowledge for better product services, better lifestyle, better, better community.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: And in your speech, in fact, you're going to point to research in the US and the UK and New Zealand as comparisons. In all of those cases, they seem to have found the balance between curiosity-driven inquiry, creative inquiry, and more practical research with direct returns. That's the sort of thing that they've been doing for years.

Now other countries have done it. Why has Australian been reluctant to do down this path?

IAN CHUBB: Well, it's hard to give an answer to that question. I mean it, and when I think to myself what would you have done 30 or 40 years ago when you were a young academic researcher thinking that what you were doing was so critically important to the future of humankind that nobody should ever intrude into that process.

I suppose I'm part of the problem; now I'm trying to be part of the solution, but we do need to make sure that we fund a number of areas where we have critical need.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: University deregulation is obviously a big issue at the moment. Now the Senate is likely to vote this down in the next couple of weeks but the Government has tied \$150 million a year for research facilities to that legislation. Is that good policy priorities?

IAN CHUBB: Well, I think that the research infrastructure component which you're talking about is really critically important for Australia's research. I think that there's been a fair amount of public campaigning going on by the research community, by the academics, by others. I don't think they overstate the problem should this not be funded.

I think it's a quite accurate representation of the damage that this would do to us were this not funded so I'm hoping, I'm hopeful, that the Government will release the bridging finance we need.

Because we need that because we've got a review on right at the moment, we're in the middle of that review indeed. It's to report in May to the Minister about the future funding for research infrastructure but we need to get the existing facilities through that so that the budget after this coming one is the one where we see the rubber on the road.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: So you don't think it should be tied to the regulation legislation?

IAN CHUBB: Well, I think it's a pity. I think they're quite different things and I think that the reason for having

the two are for quite different purposes and I think that we should really recognise the fact that it would be - I don't want to overuse words like calamity or calamitous or anything like that but it would be seriously damaging were this not to be funded.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: And presumably the indecision is having an impact already, isn't it?

IAN CHUBB: Well, there's a lot of uncertainty out there. I mean we've seen many people, I don't know, 100, more than 100 people in this review process and I don't think there's been one that has not argued that these facilities are serving a very fine purpose. I don't think there's one that hasn't warned us that there are people now beginning to leave. There are boards of some of them that are refusing to sign off because of their doubts about future funding - and so that anxiety, that level of uncertainty is inducing an anxiety that will ultimately result in highly talented people getting out of them.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Alright, just finally, university deregulation is an issue generally. As a former long term vice-chancellor, do you believe the Government is right when it argues that higher education system does need to be regulated or risk falling behind?

IAN CHUBB: Michael, when I retired as a vice-chancellor I promised myself that I would not comment on contemporary issues in higher education and tell my colleagues, colleagues I left behind how to do their jobs so I have a view but I don't have a comment.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Okay, Professor Chubb, thanks very much for joining us.

IAN CHUBB: Okay.